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PRESENTATION BEFORE  
LEGAL AID OF NORTH WEST TEXAS**

**June 12, 2003**

Thank you for inviting me to Texas and to this wonderful celebration of your legal services program. I am delighted to be here this morning and to join more than 200 of you as you take a significant step in your journey to become a new and stronger program.

We are here today because of the efforts and vision of several people, in particular, and I would like to note their work, insight and dedication to your program and clients. Larry Long, former chair of West Texas Legal Services and Sally Crawford, former chair of Legal Services of North Texas had the foresight to understand the importance of merging your two programs and the energy to see it through. Congratulations to you both for helping everyone here today get to this point in your collective history. Your work as chair and vice-chair respectively for the coming months will assure thoughtful and knowledgeable leadership for Legal Aid of North West Texas.

I also want to acknowledge Jessie Gaines and Jonathan Vickery. They were most often on the front lines, attending to details and eroding the bumps in the merger road. I am sure there were moments that can be described as more than difficult, or perhaps a Texas-sized difficult, but you both saw the rainbow at the end of this challenging highway, and I salute you for your guidance, patience and tenacity.

This morning I want to talk about the subject that has been the primary focus of my professional life over the last 28 years — the provision of high quality legal services to people who could not otherwise afford legal aid. As you may know, I started my legal aid journey fresh out of law school in 1975. As I was sworn in as a licensed attorney in Iowa — a small rural farming state in the Midwest — I optimistically and mistakenly believed that my “life in legal services” would be a short one. I truly believed that in my lifetime I would witness the eradication of poverty and injustice. I believed that I would see the day when no person — Iowan or Texan — goes hungry at night. I believed to the very core of my soul that the human race was on the brink of a new era in which intolerance, bigotry, and prejudice would no longer exist. But as we all know today that young woman who began her life in legal services in 1975 full of hope and promise — and just a wee bit naïve — was not correct about what the future held.

Today, in the offices of the Legal Services Corporation of Iowa young attorneys are assisting the children and the grandchildren of the clients I tried to help 28 years ago. Today, in our country, hundreds of thousands of people live in the streets. Today, millions of children go to bed hungry at night. Today, just like 28 years ago, racial and ethnic bigotry remain the central reality of most of our clients’ lives. Today — like

yesterday — thousands of people knock daily on the door of legal services only to be told, “no one is home.” And that is the reality that brings us here on this beautiful June morning. We come because, although we are all too acutely aware that the promise of legal services has not been fulfilled, we are not ready to let go of its “promise.” We are not ready to call it quits. We are not ready to stop believing that we can construct a world-class legal services delivery system.

You all are poised today to move forward to build a strong and healthy legal service program that can deliver high quality legal services to the thousands of clients and potential clients who turn to you. But, a meeting like this one is also an opportunity to reflect on where we have been, albeit with the benefit of a rear view mirror. So I am going to talk for a few minutes about the lessons I have learned during my 28 years in legal services — or to put in a different way, I am going to share with you what I know now that I wish I had known earlier. Maybe it will be of some benefit to you. Maybe it won't. But, it most assuredly makes me feel better.

*Life Lesson Number One* – When we launched our state planning initiative, and asked state justice communities to examine the relationship between the structure of their delivery system and desired outcomes, (such as effectiveness, quality and efficiency; the capacity of the delivery system to provide client access to a full range of service; and the ability of the system to produce consistent high quality outcomes for clients no matter where in the state the client resides), we understood that in some situations, the examination would lead to a decision to merge or reconfigure legal services programs. What I do not think that any of us fully grasped was how complex and time-consuming mergers can be. In addition, we did not completely understand their enormous potential to improve client services.

I wish I had known then that mergers consume a great deal of time and that the changes they bring for staff, boards and clients that can require some adjustment. On the other hand, all of merger's challenges are easily mastered by people of good will who are able to put client needs and community concerns above personal preferences. Strong leadership and a clear vision of the merger's goals can steer any program over the rocky shoals that all restructures experience to one degree or another. A good sense of humor helps immensely as does celebrating successes, regardless of how insignificant they seem, and creating situations in which everyone comes together to learn from and about one another and their common commitment to making their community a more humane one, just as you are doing now. Of course, it is important to maintain a good pace, always moving forward even if it means breaking down seemingly intractable problems into manageable bits, and tackling them one at a time. And it is crucial to keep your eye on the prize, avoiding the sidetracks that frustrate achieving agreed-upon goals.

Above all, I wish that I had known at the beginning of our state planning initiative how profound its impact would be on the lives of clients, the morale of program staff, and the synergistic efforts of state justice communities. That knowledge would have helped me allay people's fears about merger difficulties and buoy them up during setbacks. Across the country, we have seen programs emerge from the configuration process with a renewed sense of vigor and enthusiasm. Advocates are excited again about their cases because they benefit from larger staffs with more experienced peers, just as young attorneys grow stronger with an expanded number of models and mentors. Clients too find that larger programs offer more diverse services and staff, including individuals with cultural and linguistic experiences similar to theirs.

Mergers test all programs that go through them, and the process of achieving a merged program is a bonding and confidence-building experience. Interestingly, mergers also create opportunities for new leaders and space for fresh voices and ideas. This too invigorates staffs and boards.

For me, completed mergers are a lot like school commencements. They signal the end of one era and the beginning of the next, a time when you go forward more educated and prepared for what the future holds. That is what I wish I could have conveyed to those programs in the merger vanguard, what I subsequently learned and what I want to share with you. Like school, the merger experience involves tests, periods of intense work and those during which everything appears to lie fallow. As in academia, mergers involve learning curves and learning from recent graduates, experienced teachers and peers. Staff who are involved in a merger are like scholars — some find the work easy and some struggle, while many discover some aspect of the process that is detestable and another that is "a snap."

But everyone graduates, and I am delighted to be attending yours. Collectively, you recognized that the legal services world had changed over the years. Guided by your board and staff leaders, you took the bold and risky step of instituting new approaches, some significant, to adapt. Now you are positioned to use your new organization in a powerful and productive way. Congratulations! If you were wearing mortarboards, I would ask you to toss them in the air! Since we cannot, I do hope that very soon you take the time to acknowledge how far you have come and the milestone you have reached. From now on you will go forward as a new program and new staff — informed by your former programs and experiences — to meet an environment that none of the original designers of legal services programs was ever able to anticipate, but one that programs like yours rise to meet with wisdom and courage.

*Legal Services Life Lesson Two* — I wish I had not deluded myself into thinking that the glass ceiling would be non-existent by the time I turned 50. All of the women in this room know that the glass ceiling still exists — and we know beyond a shadow of

a doubt that it still exists in the legal services community. For example, although more than 50 percent of legal services programs staff attorneys are women, of the 208 LSC program directors in 2001, a mere 34 percent was female. And this figure compares favorably with prior years.

Had I known that the glass ceiling would still be a reality in 2003, I might have made different choices and decisions when I was the Executive Director of two legal services programs, during the eighties and nineties. I think I would not have been so trusting that competence would prevail over gender bias. I know I would have given more thought to how I could create and nurture leadership and management qualities in the young lawyers under me; I would have anticipated the antagonism towards women that remains in our legal system — not only for women lawyers but also for our female clients — and I would have devoted much more time and energy to ensure that our system of justice grew more hospitable towards women.

*Life Lesson Number Three* – This life lesson is subtitled “making friends and influencing people.” It reflects my realization, as a grownup, that legal services programs had the ability to generate far more support in the community than many of our programs actualized in their early years. As a young lawyer, I subscribed to the “you’re part of the solution or you’re part of the problem” philosophy. Quite frankly, I ignored the many possible friends of legal services who existed in my community because they were traditional lawyers, bar leaders, conservatives or in other ways reflected political and professional choices that I would never make. Over the years, I have learned that many individuals, once they come to understand the mission of legal services programs, are wholehearted supporters of our work, and that they can become some of our staunchest advocates. Furthermore, these people are able to speak powerfully on our behalf because they can touch those who may oppose or misunderstand our efforts in a way that many of us cannot. It has been a real pleasure for me to observe successful legal services programs making allies with groups and individuals that many of us in the early years might have overlooked. Formations of state justice communities and designated state planning bodies, accompanied by the significant activities they undertake, have shown perhaps more concretely that state bar leaders care deeply about legal services for the poorest residents of their communities, as do judges, court administrators, faith-based groups and other unlikely partners.

It has been a humbling lesson for me, as it has been for some of my peers, to understand that legal services staff are not the only ones in the world who are intensely concerned about disenfranchised people. As Sally and Jonathan eloquently noted in a recent annual report, “Justice is only certain when all are treated fairly and in accordance with the rule of law.” Many, many members of our community believe this, and we are all better for it.

*Life Lesson Number Four* – Would that I had foreseen how important speaking at least one language beyond English would be for legal services today. That is a simple way of expressing how much I would have enjoyed knowing, 28 years ago, how diverse our legal services community has become. Even in Texas, where Hispanic residents preceded settlers from the eastern part of the U.S. and Europe, the vision of an expanding, vibrant Asian American population must be unexpected. Now our cities, whether in Texas or Iowa, Massachusetts or North Dakota, are home to people who came to America or whose parents came here from all over the world, including countries whose names we never even uttered ten years ago.

Had I seen the future during my tenure in Iowa, I would have cultivated opportunities for staff to learn new languages. With greater effort than I expended, I would have recruited advocates and administrative staff with many different cultural experiences. I would have hired employees fluent in Spanish, but also Vietnamese, Cambodian, Arabic, Creole, Mayan, and West African French – as a beginning!

But then I would have also seen that cultural pluralism implicates a variety of experiences beyond ethnicity. Staff must understand the issues and complications of old age, homelessness, and domestic violence. Our clients more than ever before are children, youth, and very young adults. They face crises that I did not anticipate. It would have been useful to have a head start on training staff, board members and myself on ways to help the many individuals and groups that need urgent legal services and for whom there is no one else.

Lacking the magical rear-view mirror option and the chance to rectify missed opportunities, I must rely – and so must each of you – on our profound need to live in a just world and on the resources we own – individually and collectively -- that daily enable us to push closer to our dream. We try to greet each situation, no matter how unexpected, with intelligence and flexibility. We try to learn from each experience and to join willingly with others who are more skilled so that combined we accomplish what individually we cannot.

Soren Kierkegaard wrote that although we live life forward, we understand it best backward. I have learned that our community must strive long and hard to obtain justice for clients and ourselves because there is no easy, quick solution. I recognize that legal representation and client concerns are more complicated than I perceived them to be and maybe than they used to be, and I try to confront complex challenges with complex responses. It is true that women often have to work harder to achieve parity, even in the legal services world, as do persons of color. That makes me sad but it does not deter me from attempting to rectify the situation. Daily I see that our communities are growing more diverse, and am thrilled. It means great food,

interesting clothes, wonderful art and music, marvelous neighbors and friends and, above all, clients who continue to inspire, challenge and teach all of us.

I want to end today with a quote I used last week in Vermont, where I spoke to two legal services programs. To paraphrase Oliver Wendell Holmes, justice is not a “brooding omnipresence in the sky,” but is embodied in the flesh and blood human beings. Each of us in this room makes justice concrete. For our clients and their communities — for the ones in our offices today and the ones we will see tomorrow and next week and next month and next year — justice is us. Justice will be no better than what we make it. And while that is an awesome, humbling, and terrifying responsibility, it is also a wonderful gift.

Thank you for letting me be with you today. You make me proud to be a legal services lawyer.